



# NEWSLETTER

**SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF THE MILITARY**



## POW/MIA CHAIR UNVEILED IN STATE CAPITOL

Veterans gathered in Pierre this week for the dedication and unveiling of the POW/MIA chair of honor. The chair, donated by Rolling Thunder Inc. Chapter 2 of Brookings, is located on the west wing of second floor of the South Dakota Capitol.

Speakers for the celebration included Governor Kristi Noem, SDDVA Deputy Secretary Aaron Pollard, Brigadier General Michael Oster, Bruce Jones, David Forsythe, Michael Bekaert, Byron Callies, and Bob Foster and Steven Wallen from the Rolling Thunder.

In his remarks that day, Deputy Secretary Pollard said, "Today we remember.....remember the names and faces of prisoners of war and remember the names and faces of those still missing in action. We remember and reaffirm the pledge to account for every service member who did not come home."

"With this beautiful display we commit to remembering sacrifice and commit to recognizing the obligations we have; not only to those who personally sacrificed, but also to their loved ones," said Pollard.

Special thanks to Bob Foster and the members of Rolling Thunder Inc. Chapter 2, Governor Noem, the Bureau of Administration, and the members of the Capitol Complex Restoration and Beautification Commission for their support of this display.

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# 235TH MILITARY POLICE COMPANY DEPLOYS TO CUBA

About 110 members of the South Dakota National Guard's 235th Military Police Company were honored during a deployment ceremony at the Monument's Fine Arts Theatre in Rapid City, Jan. 5, as the unit departs for a year-long federal deployment to Cuba.

Hundreds of family members, friends, and community supporters came out to bid farewell to the Rapid City and Sioux Falls-based unit as they depart on their mission to provide detention operations support to Joint Task Force Guantanamo.

"This is the moment we have been preparing for almost the last 16 months – we have put in a lot of time, effort and sacrifice so we could accomplish this difficult mission," said Capt. Pat Moran, commander of 235th Military Police Company. "One thing that I know about the 235th, is we are ready, we are trained, and we have the leaders and experience to handle this mission. I know that our soldiers and family will get through this next year together."

This will be the fourth time the unit has been federally mobilized since 9/11. The unit deployed stateside to Fort Carson in 2003, and twice to Afghanistan in 2007 and 2013. This will be the first time a SDNG unit has performed this mission at Guantanamo.



The ceremony included remarks from Gov. Kristi Noem, Congressman Dusty Johnson, Rapid City Mayor Steve Allender and SDNG Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Jeff Marlette.

"There is not a doubt in any of our minds that you will serve with excellence and that you will be an example to those around you of what service with dignity and respect for others is," said Noem. "I am so incredibly grateful that you are going to serve, protecting our freedoms and our liberties in a very unique mission that is so incredibly necessary."

"We simply cannot say thank you enough on behalf of a grateful state and a grateful nation," said Johnson. "For those of us who have not served, we cannot know the kind of cost this has on families and our citizen-soldiers, so we just have to say thank you."

The unit will report to Fort Bliss, Texas, to complete several weeks of training prior to deployment overseas.

"To the families and members of the 235th, thank you for your sacrifice, inspiration, commitment and everything you have done and will continue to do in the future," said Moran. "You are all true heroes in your own right, and in many ways that is a more difficult task to ensure life continues back in South Dakota."

# **SOUTH DAKOTA VETERANS COUNCIL MEETS AND HOSTS LEGISLATIVE RECEPTION WITH SDDVA**

Members of the South Dakota Veterans Council met in Pierre this week for their first quarterly meeting of the year.

Presentations were made by the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs, South Dakota Department of Tribal Affairs, Sioux Falls VA Health Care System, and the South Dakota Veterans Service Officers Association. Staff from Senators Thune and Rounds and Congressman Johnson's offices presented updates from Washington. An update was also presented on the South Dakota Veterans Cemetery Endowment Fund.



The Council recognized the Northeast South Dakota Vietnam Veterans Chapter 1054 for being named "Chapter of the Year".

The next Council meeting will be held April 20, 2022, at the South Dakota Military Heritage Alliance in Sioux Falls, and the third and fourth quarter meetings will be held on the road.

Later that evening the Council and the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs hosted the annual reception for legislators. This reception affords the veterans and the Department the opportunity to thank the legislators for their support and visit with them about legislative issues on the agenda for 2022.

# **VA TAKES ACTION TO BECOME FEDERAL MODEL FOR INCLUSION, DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND ACCESS FOR VETERANS AND EMPLOYEES**

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs makes inclusion, diversity, equity, and access a part of its cultural transformation action plan.

An 18-member I-DEA task force, created April 1, 2021, developed 20 recommendations and 68 sub-recommendations for the department to consider during the next four years to ensure all VA employees, veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors have equitable treatment and experiences when interacting with VA.

“This action plan reflects the Department of Veterans Affairs is working to ensure our customers and employees have equal access to all VA offerings and are treated with respect and dignity when interacting with the department,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “We recognize this work requires a culture shift and will not happen overnight, but the Biden-Harris administration and I will see this through to completion on behalf of the veterans we serve and the diverse workforce that carries out our mission.”

The 20 recommendations address potential gaps to include:

- Collecting and disaggregating race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation demographic information about VA employees and veterans served.
- Developing a workforce plan to integrate I-DEA into hiring, position management, talent development, and executive coaching to address potential areas of need.
- Revamping the VA’s communications efforts to better reach underserved communities such as those who live in rural or remote areas, outlying communities, or veterans with limited English proficiency.

The I-DEA action plan also establishes an I-DEA sub-council tasked with facilitating policy development, adoption and implementation of the recommendations outlined in the plan and to ensure enterprise policy decisions are consistent with the secretary’s strategic goals.

The sub-council is chaired by Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration/Operations Security and Preparedness Gina Grosso and Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Resolution, Management, Diversity, and Inclusion Harvey Johnson.

President Joseph Biden issued Executive Order 13985, [Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#), Jan. 20, 2021, and Executive Order 14035 on [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce](#), June 25, 2021.

# VA HEALTH RECORDS NOW DISPLAY GENDER IDENTITY

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs began including gender identifiers in its national medical record system in December 2021 to help VA providers better understand and meet the health care needs of veterans.

Providing this option demonstrates the agency's commitment to delivering care fitting the individual needs of veterans enrolled in VA health care, including transgender and gender-diverse Veterans.

VA added transgender male, transgender female, non-binary, other or does not wish to disclose options to its new gender identity field.

"Our goal is to align the department's policies and procedures with the president's vision for a more inclusive government," said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. "All veterans, all people, have a basic right to be identified as they define themselves. This is essential for their general well-being and overall health. Knowing the gender identity of transgender and gender diverse veterans helps us better serve them."

A person's gender identity conveys essential information about who they are and may signal experiences of stigma and discrimination that can affect their health. VA health records now display both gender identity and preferred name, so VA staff can address the Veteran appropriately.



# VA, CIVIL AIR PATROL CHAPLAIN CORPS TO SUPPORT FAMILIES OF VETERANS AT NATIONAL CEMETERIES

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs' [National Chaplain Service](#) teams up with the [Civil Air Patrol Chaplain Corps](#) to expand veterans' families access to qualified faith leaders during committal and memorial services held at [VA cemeteries](#).



The VA's National Chaplain Service provides administrative support, training, and other services to assist CAP in supporting VA national cemeteries and providing chaplain coverage when a VA chaplain is not available.

"The partnership, implemented in December 2021, came about from increased requests from family members asking for chaplain support during burial services at NCA cemeteries," said VA Chaplain Program Manager for Family Care and Bereavement Chad Maxey. "Working with Civil Air Patrol expands our ability to provide trained chaplains, whether from VA or CAP, to veterans' families when they need it most."

Every VA Medical Center has chaplain services available to veterans and their families that represent a broad spectrum of religious traditions. Family members of veterans may request chaplain support through their local VA Chaplain Service Office when scheduling a burial.

"Our chaplains stand ready to help families honor the memory and legacy of their loved ones," said Civil Air Patrol National Commander Maj. Gen. Edward D. Phelka. "We look forward to working with the VA in support of this noble mission."

In 2021, VA's National Cemetery Administration conducted more than 150,000 burials, an all-time high dating back to its establishment in 1973.

## National Cemetery Administration



# UPCOMING EVENTS

Jan 17—State Offices Closed  
Jan 19—SDDVA “Virtual” Mini Conference—10:00 am (CT)  
Jan 30-31—SD VFW Annual Legislative Conference—Moose Lodge (910 N. Deadwood Street)—Fort Pierre  
Feb 18-20—American Legion Mid Winter Conference—Oacoma  
Feb 21—State Offices Closed  
Feb 26-27—SD Vietnam Veterans & Era Reunion—Ramada Inn—Mitchell  
Feb 27-Mar 3—National VFW Legislative Conference—Washington, DC  
Apr 4—BHNC Unaccompanied Veterans Memorial Service—(20901 Pleasant Valley Dr)—Sturgis—9:00 am (MT)  
Apr 8-10—DAV of South Dakota State Convention—Rushmore Hotel and Suites (445 Mt. Rushmore Road)—  
Rapid City  
Apr 20—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Military Heritage Alliance Building—Spirit of America Room—(1600 W.  
Russell Street)—Sioux Falls—9:00 am (CT)  
Jun 9-12—State VFW Convention—Ramada Inn—Mitchell  
Jun 12—Midwest Honor Flight Annual Honor Ride  
Jun 16-19—State American Legion Conference—Watertown  
Jul 11—BHNC Unaccompanied Veterans Memorial Service—(20901 Pleasant Valley Dr)—Sturgis—9:00 am (MT)  
Jul 18-23—National Veterans Golden Age Games—Sioux Falls  
Aug 14-19—Military Order of the Purple Heart National Convention—Rapid City  
Aug 15-18—SDDVA Annual CTVSO Benefit School  
Sep 1—Veterans Day at the South Dakota State Fair  
Sep 1-5—South Dakota State Fair  
Oct 3—BHNC Unaccompanied Veterans Memorial Service—(20901 Pleasant Valley Dr)—Sturgis—9:00 am (MT)  
Dec 17—Wreaths Across America Wreath Laying Ceremony at South Dakota Veterans Cemetery—Sioux Falls—  
11:00 am (CT)

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